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ABSTRACT

New interest by Australians in the state of rural education requires new understanding of factors affecting rural education and its related issues. Educational programs have not been flexible enough to cope with rural diversity, a key element in the milieu. Standards such as "equality of opportunity" and "uniformity" have been misapplied to rural Australian education, which is made distinctive by the inter-relatedness of many factors. Three dimensions of isolation are discussed: (1) types of isolation (geographic, cultural, social, and professional isolation); (2) ways of coping with isolation (understanding isolation, developing a sense of community, developing awareness of options, training the isolated, application, and technology); and (3) conditions affecting educational changes in isolated communities (social and political climate, pedagogy, finance, and incentives for change). All these concerns focus on the issue of local control. Formal school systems control programs but often have little knowledge of local conditions and needs. Rural Australian communities may simply warrant different types of schooling. Acknowledgement of this concept and the provision of more local decision-making powers will increase educational flexibility and quality for rural children. (TES)

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Factors and Issues in Australian Rural Education: A Case for New Perspectives*

F. Darnell and A. H. Higgins

Introduction

Interest in the state of rural education has increased substantially during the past decade. Commonwealth and State Government initiatives in rural education have been carried out in recent years on the premise that rural education requires special attention and extraordinary resources. Special interest groups, such as the Isolated Children's Parent's Association and the National Aboriginal Education Committee, have been lobbying at the federal and state levels for improved rural education. Because the means to bring about improvements in rural education are now being sought, a few academics, government officials and teachers and parents groups are trying to understand the broad implications of this movement. The purpose of this paper is to contribute to that process by examining some of the factors that affect rural education, and identify the issues in rural education confronting governments, the education profession and rural people at large.

A question so aptly put by Bessant: 'Is the Australian rural community sufficiently different to warrant a "different" type of schooling?' (1978, p. 130) suggests the essence of much of the debate on the nature of rural education now heard throughout the country. The question grew out of his concern that Australian rural life is erroneously associated with the concept of disadvantage, that rural life, because it is different from urban life, is poorer and therefore ought to be compensated for by the provision of additional grants and an extra supply of skilled personnel. Even the Australian Schools Commission in attempting to define isolation links rural life with disadvantage (1981, pp. 164-172 and 383-383). However, Bessant noted that since disadvantage occurs in both urban and rural settings, special pleading on behalf of country residents does little to resolve the question of difference within the whole Australian community. In this paper the contention is made that diversity is a key feature of the rural milieu and that educational provision made for people in remote places has not been sufficiently flexible to cope with this diversity.

- * Portions of this article are drawn from F. Darnell, "Conclusions" in *Rural Education: in Pursuit of Excellence*. F. Darnell and P.M. Simpson (eds.). University of Western Australia Press, 1981 and A.H. Higgins, *Australian Rural Education: Brief Review and Prospect*, publication pending.

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The key words emanating from discussions about education provision anywhere in Australia have been equality of opportunity, pragmatism and uniformity. It is the way that these terms have been interpreted and applied historically that may be the cause of the present dilemma in rural education. The original ideas underlying Australian education have been corrupted in their application. 'Equality of opportunity' has come to mean equal provision of facilities, instructional material and pupil-teacher ratios. Uniformity has become teachers trained in the same methodology, each teaching the same syllabus in a similar way. Pragmatism has become simple vocationalism. If this perception is in any way accurate, then the drift to using disadvantage descriptors to typify rural education becomes apparent. Such descriptors do not take into account the distinctive rural context, relying only on disadvantage as the qualifier. For example, the cost of providing the same facilities to the small schools as provided to the large ones becomes prohibitive, therefore the small places lacking the facilities must be 'disadvantaged'. Also, since small towns exhibit fewer occupational roles, children living in isolation have lower occupational horizons and are seen as 'disadvantaged'. It may be that these conditions are sufficient to produce genuine disadvantage, but they do not *necessarily* cause it. This situation raises the question about the wisdom of having a common public policy for education intended for all, regardless of location, and suggests that policy should be differentiated in terms of characteristics possessed by local communities. It is a fact that many Australians live in isolation, but it is of varying degrees and kinds. There is a need to establish what these mean to education.

The feature most frequently associated with isolated places is *geography*. Great distances and sparse population characterise the world's remote places. But the notion of distance is not confined to space between locations. Distance involves other factors, notably time, cost, terrain and technology. For example the length of time taken to travel from place to place is related to the actual number of kilometres involved, the type of transport available and the nature of terrain lying between them. In addition, time can be modified by the type of system used to communicate or travel between places. Usually the most efficient or rapid means of travel or communications are the most expensive to develop and apply. Geographical isolation is, therefore, place specific, since the isolation is determined partly by landforms, the existing state of available technology, reasons for communicating and travelling to the place and the amount of money available to apply to the means of reducing the isolation.

Geographic isolation is only one form of remoteness within Australia. *Minority cultural groups*, especially Aboriginal Australians, are isolated from the dominant white Eurocentric Australians, but in some cases they are also isolated from their tribal lands because of restrictive land occupancy laws. Similarly, non-English speaking migrant groups in remote mining places may be isolated from the white English speaking majority and from those of a similar background residing in major metropolitan centres. Both of these two groups create special problems in the provision of education to such communities because their needs are complex and unfamiliar to the more traditional Australian educational personnel. In addition, both Aboriginal and migrant groups do not use the English

language as a regular means of communication, which further isolates them from the wider life of the Australian community.

Social isolation occurs equally in urban and rural societies but its effects stand out clearly in remote places because of the smaller groups of people involved. Social differences recur through status levels attributable to circumstances of birth, employment, wealth and class grouping. Social status sometimes is given as a result of ownership of land or the means of production but this is only one factor in the concept of general isolation brought about by economic factors. Firstly, inability to earn money leads to social isolation and many young unemployed school leavers form a group of isolated people within remote communities. These communities have such a narrow economic base that any rural depression leaves no margin of tolerance to support unemployed and unskilled youths. Consequently, further employment depends on either economic recovery or upon their leaving the community to find work elsewhere. Skill training is one way of overcoming this isolation, however such training depends on governmental aid to provide teachers, facilities and materials and this is partly determined by available national wealth, willingness of local residents to support related activities and the prevailing political climate. If such provisions exceed the uniform and equal availability of resources as prescribed by the central authority, they may be denied.

Pupils are not alone in their isolation within the educational context; teachers may also suffer isolation both within the community and from other teachers, especially in the smallest places dominated by Aboriginal or ethnic minorities. Such teachers may feel cut off from colleagues, from specialist skills in areas where their own preparation has been insufficient and from larger communities in which their anonymity can be preserved. Such isolation makes upgrading or inservice study more difficult to pursue, appraisal of new teaching techniques harder to undertake and the elaboration of new knowledge less certain. *Professional isolation* can be overcome by regular provision of inservice seminars or advisory teacher visits but time, costs and distance all act to reduce their frequency and effectiveness.

The fact that people involved in unusual situations often have deeper insights into the nature of their circumstances than those more removed is often overlooked in a centralised education system. It follows that adults living in the most geographically and socially isolated circumstances may make good advisors and teachers for children in similar situations. Consideration should be given to making special provision for training such adults. For example, adult Aboriginal people often see a need to regenerate traditional life-styles through their children, but at the same time recognise the necessity of having the young become functionally viable in a white oriented technological society. This situation shows the need for Aboriginals to become teachers in their own right.

The spread of radio and television encourages the production of materials for transmission that suit the lowest common-denominator. This is apt to have significant effects on remote communities. First, members of the dominant group are able to keep in contact with wider national events; secondly, members of minority groups might fail to relate to the materials communicated. Such material includes little pertaining to their culture or

environment. Consequently, for educational improvement to occur in remote places there is need to change the control of distributed material. This implies training, skill development and access to the public media by members of minority groups. The purpose of the redistribution of media access would be to ensure continuation of minority groups and their associated culture.

Each of these approaches to coping with isolation could be effected by large bureaucratic agencies. However, such institutionalised bodies tend toward inertia and often reflect dominant societal attitudes. This may reduce their effectiveness in bringing about change to educational systems which serve to reduce the various categories of isolation. Small bureaucracies have the same capacity for insensitiveness that characterise large ones; however, some substantial measure of local control can increase the speed that traditional educational structures take to adapt to a changing environment. The possibility of this occurring provides sufficient argument for allowing measures of freedom for remote people to manage the institutional structures affecting their lives. Devolution of some authority may redirect central bureaucratic influence on the educational structure by introducing a more personal and humane element into education provision.

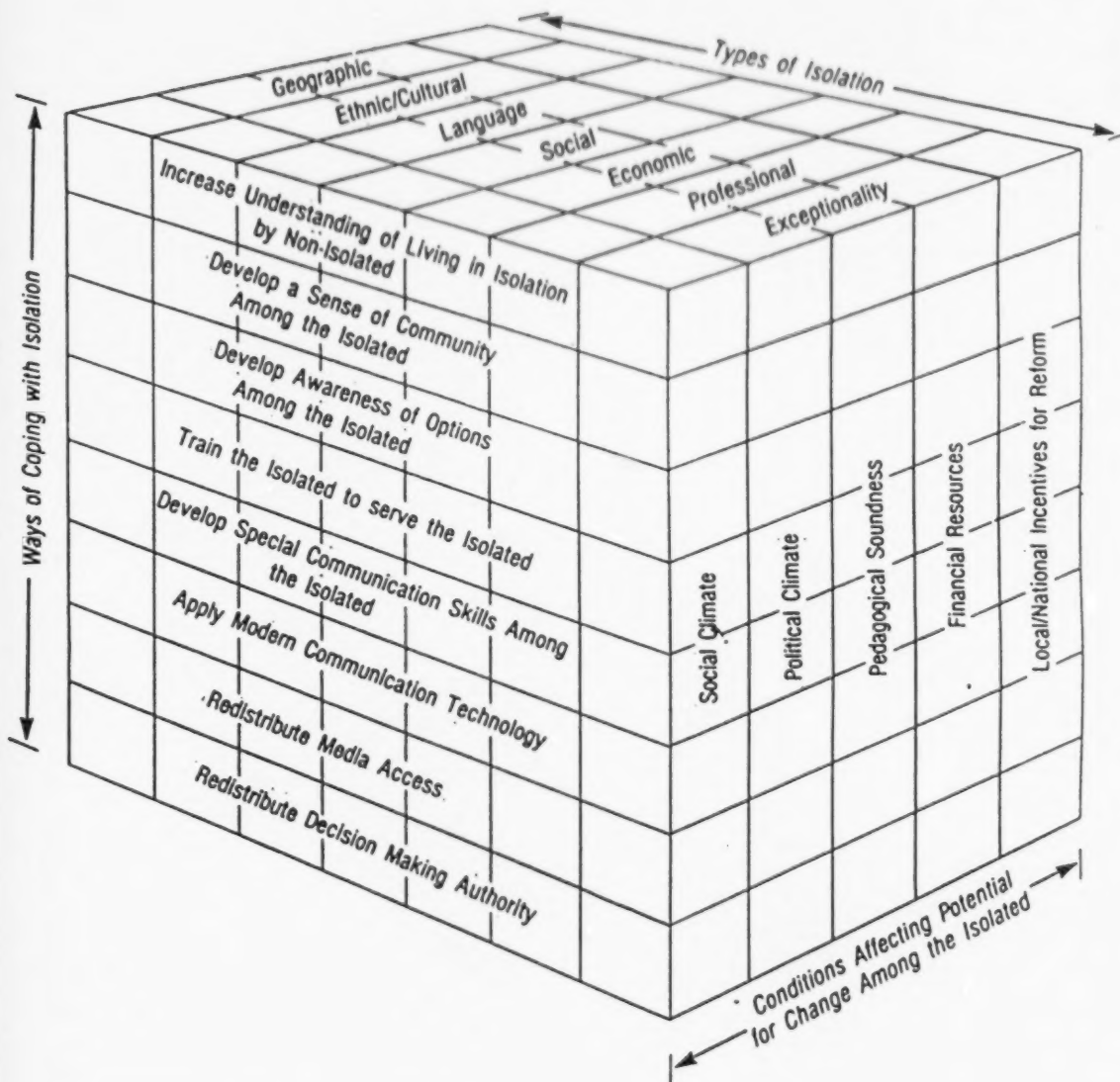
Inter-relatedness of Factors

Three classes of factors or 'dimensions of isolation' are identified in this paper: types of isolation, ways of coping with isolation and conditions affecting the likelihood of favourable educational changes occurring among the isolated. All three impinge on the form, quality and extent of education in remote places. Each of the dimensions, when analysed independent of the others, seems to be relatively simple. But when each dimension is considered in relationship to the other two, the process of analysis becomes complex, although more promising as a means of improving the understanding of what is required to bring about better education in remote places. Inter-relatedness of the dimensions may best be illustrated by use of a diagram, such as the following three-dimensional matrix.

The types of isolation which residents in rural Australia are subject to are listed on the top panel of the diagram. Individuals may experience these forms of isolation singularly or in combination. Ways of coping with isolation differ widely, as shown on the front facing panel, and the types of conditions which must be favourably inclined if the coping mechanism is to prove successful are displayed on the side panel.

The matrix makes it obvious that many factors must be taken into account when education for rural residents is being considered. However, of greater importance than any single factor or group of factors is their relationship to each other. For example, it would be of little value to seek devolution of authority as a way to cope with geographic or ethnic-cultural isolation if the political climate in a given situation is overwhelmingly against the concept of shared authority. Or, to take another example, if an innovative technological device that is distance indifferent, such as satellite communications, is utilised to overcome geographic and social isolation in

the absence of pedagogically sound uses for the technology, or if it is shown to be cost ineffective, these problems would be recognised.



Three-dimensional Model for Assessing Inter-relatedness of Factors that Impinge on Education in Isolated Places

The Issues

Equality of opportunity, as already stated, has often come to mean equal provision, a dubious interpretation at best. Although equality of opportunity may be accepted in principle, if only by use of this unsophisticated interpretation, equality of opportunity will be successfully applied only with the advent of provisions for high quality education programmes. This means that higher costs attributable to rurality cannot be labelled extraordinary or extravagant. Resources made available for education are done so for the common good, and even though guaranteeing equality of opportunity in rural areas may be more costly than in centres of dense population, such costs should be borne by society as a whole; just as are other specific forms of education which may be more costly than the typical urban classroom. Formulae designed for staffing and financing rural schools need to be weighted in a manner that assures equality of opportunity in the sense that acknowledges the principle that provision of uniform and similar amounts of resources may, in fact, be to treat rural pupils unequally.

Education for Aborigines in rural areas is a complex subject and may require the most extensive study and most extraordinary means of all rural education before substantial improvements in education are realised. When a relatively stable way of life is interrupted by the demands of Western technology and social systems, Aboriginal populations are bound to experience unrest. Education is caught up in the struggle of the people to regain a new form of stability, a struggle compounded by a paradox that exacerbates the problem. Education as an element of Western society is a source of strain on the traditional indigenous society, while simultaneously offering a means to cope with change and ultimately a new form of stability. The provision of more teachers sensitive to difference in Aboriginal schoolchildren, incentives to attract and keep teachers specially trained for Aboriginal schools and extensive professional development of Aborigines as teachers in their own right, deserve particular attention. Much of the potential for improvement in rural education is dependent on the *education levels attained by teachers* and their professional acumen. Young has pointed out that 'Pre-service teacher training for rural schools requires a balanced curriculum which contains both special as well as general skills which will enable the teacher new to rural education to tackle his teaching tasks with confidence' (1981, p. 174). It is significant to note, therefore, that teacher education programmes with rural assignments in mind are virtually non-existent.

The advent of *satellite communications technology* has created a modern issue in rural education. Will there be sufficient commitment to satellites to utilise this form of communication in rural areas and permit it, with all its unknown but potentially rewarding characteristics, to extend or replace older forms of communication, information retrieval and storage methods? There are indications that because the potential is misunderstood or because its costs are high (even though cost effectiveness can be shown if sufficient numbers participate) satellite communications will not receive early attention by education officials. Of potentially greater concern than inadequate use of satellites is the fear that political considerations will dictate the nature of material transmitted at the expense of interests and

values of local communities and individuals. If material transmitted reflects political and social uniformity derived from the notion that the population is homogenous rather than material inspired by the diverse, heterogenous population that actually comprises rural regions, satellite communications could become culturally biased and stifling rather than balanced and enriching.

Even if ways are developed to improve teacher training, adequate financing provided and modern technology brought to bear on rural education, there will remain endless problems of *curriculum design*. Finding the means to accommodate the values held by rural residents, while preparing children for the probability that they will live in a society more apt to be urban in nature than the rural society in which they now live is one of the fundamental dilemmas of rural education.

Relevance of the curriculum to local situations introduces the problem of educational decision-making, or more specifically the decentralisation of education. If authority is shifted to community-based bodies, is there likely to be a better balance of forces vying for pre-eminence in the classroom? Is local control necessary to generate education programmes to meet local needs? Is it reasonable to assume that decisions required at the local level must be commensurate with the type of authority to make them? These questions focus on the issue of *local control*.

Writing some twenty-six years ago, and speaking of education in general, Butts described what now might be considered the essence of the need for decentralized decision-making in the rural situation today: '... education is more vital and healthy when it is kept close to the needs of the people and when they feel they have a genuine stake in educational institutions of their own making and for which they have a large measure of responsibility' (1955, p. 4). Australians may be moving closer to this concept and may be developing ways to bring the school and community more closely together. Where authority to make decisions that relate directly to rural school programmes has been acquired by local people positive results are being obtained. (McLean, 1981)

Acceptance of Butts's and McLean's positions means 'yes' is the preferred answer to each of the three questions above. If accepted by policy-makers, these answers imply the need for change of the most fundamental kind in the various state systems, although it must be stressed that the form new governance systems would take should be developed along lines uniquely Australian, in recognition of Australia's own political, social and economic conditions.

Conclusions

It is now recognised that education in rural areas is not a discrete object that can be labelled 'rural education'. This suggests that in the past we were deluded into looking at rural education as a single commodity and we have been seeking a single concept or principle of rural education that may be deployed unilaterally. We must now reassess that position. What must be acknowledged by policy makers and planners at one end of the education enterprise and teachers and support personnel at the other is that there is no single theory, principle, concept or notion that is universally appropriate to education in non-urban settings.

The particular combination of qualities that go to make up rural people

and how they perceive the world around them may distinguish the character of rural life more than geography and vocation. As respectors of learning on the one hand but with the inclination to be suspicious of institutions on the other, the school is often a paradox to rural residents. To reduce the paradoxical element in school/community relationships will require a more closely aligned partnership between community residents and school staffs.

It may be said that the inter-relatedness of factors that impinge on education in isolated places make rural education distinctive. It may also be said that most agencies given the responsibility for providing rural education are committed to the notion of equal provision and uniformity in their narrowest sense. This has led to a system characterised by inflexibility in policy formulation and execution more often than need be the case. What happens at home and in the community, and what is experienced at school are too often unrelated. Formal school systems have the legal and financial means to control education programmes and they have a pool of specialists available to work on education developments. But they may have little knowledge of local conditions and needs. Conversely, rural residents may intuitively know what they want by way of education for their children but they lack knowledge of the options available to them and the skills to bring these options to bear on the issues. It is policy-makers, those who execute policy, and rural residents may, through no fault of their own, lack the cognitive sophistication necessary to relate to the two worlds of professional education and rural communities simultaneously.

The very nature of rural life gives rise to relationships among rural residents that differ from the way urban residents relate to one another. And the way people relate to one another influences behaviour and creates or eliminates needs. As Nachtigal has pointed out 'accepting the reality of rurality opens an array of possibilities not previously available. It opens the possibility that rural education might just look and operate differently' (1980, p. 38). This notion, when coupled with the inter-relatedness of factors that impinge on education in isolated places, permits Bessant's question; 'Is the Australian rural community sufficiently different to warrant a "different" type of schooling?' to be answered in the affirmative. It follows from an affirmative answer that the existing practice of educational uniformity mitigates against the likelihood of the high level of flexibility that being different necessitates. And finally, if there is inadequate cognitive sophistication among the principals involved in the provision of rural education, especially among those in authority, this inadequacy may be overcome by putting into practice Butts's contention that decision-making is best when carried out closest to those affected by the decision. When it is acknowledged that rural Australia is indeed different, the possibility that rural children will receive a more flexible and better education may be vastly improved.

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